

NOT THE RIGHTEOUS!

ADAPTED FROM PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION'S RADIO SERIES, "UNSHACKLED!"

by Jack Odell

"For I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" Matthew 9:13

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Chapter 1

Leonard Pollari . . . who found Living Water

EVERY SCHOOL HAS ITS "BAD BOY." HE'S HELD RESPONSIBLE for sudden increases in cigarette smoking and hooky playing. When a vulgar new word appears on the playground, he starts it.

Leonard Pollari was the "bad boy." He learned to smoke at seven and had a taste for whiskey at twelve. When he was twenty-three, he stood before an Army Psychiatric Board. Discharged "without honor" at twenty-five, he became a jobless game poacher and then a fugitive derelict on Chicago's Skid Row. But at thirty-two he became the thing that makes his story worth telling.

Leonard's story begins in Maple, Wisconsin - population 160. Farming is poor in the iron mining country, but Finnish immigrants have settled there in solid communities. When you see a cloud of steam drifting up among the pines, you can look for a log-walled Sauna, a Finnish steam bath. And Finnish is the second language of the countryside.

It was Leonard Pollari's first language. English came later, and even today he speaks with a little swing.

Leonard was a blonde, curly-haired little black sheep. His mother made that clear to him the first time she found him smoking. Her own serious emotional problems spilled over on Leonard.

"You are a sinful boy!" Leonard was puzzled.

"What does 'sinful' mean, Mom?"

"It means you are black in the sight of GOD. You are bad. You please the devil and not GOD!"

This word "GOD" he knew, so he used it - blasphemously. The effect on his mother was frightening.

"Don't use the name of GOD in vain. What did I do to deserve such a boy?" She was near hysteria. "Does GOD punish me?"

"No, Mommie. No!"

"You curse and you smoke. You will rot like a bad apple in a barrel!"

Leonard was terrified by the outburst. But he kept on smoking in secret, and his vocabulary grew in fluency and profanity.

His mother's emotional condition worsened. In time she was committed to a mental hospital, and when Leonard was twelve, he was farmed out to a neighbor. This man introduced the boy to his first drink of whiskey.

"Leonard, you are - how old?"

"I'm twelve." He snapped the word as though it were twenty.

"So?" The man laughed. "Then you're old enough to drink liquor."

This was a new idea. Leonard was awed at the new challenge to his manhood. The man poured out a stiff jolt of whiskey.

"Here, Lenny. Drink it down."

"All of it?"

"Yeah, like a man. All of it."

Lenny held his breath and drank, bottoms up. And though he gagged, the quick effect on his brain opened a new door of experience. By the time Leonard reached the eighth grade, more on seniority than scholarship, he was a teen-age toper. He traveled the length of Douglas County to crash any celebration where liquor was served, staying until the last bottle was empty.

When the grade school tired of the boy, he graduated into the aimless life of an odd-job man. But for Pearl Harbor he might have remained there.

Conscription is a disaster to some men. But military service gives to others the only purpose and order they've ever known. This was so with Pollari. In the Medical Corps he felt wanted and useful. He became more cheerful and outgoing, and soon earned new responsibilities. Too much responsibility.

Pollari was sent to convoy hospital patients on a transfer by rail, and failed. He got drunk, deserted his patients, and disappeared. Discipline was limited to company punishment, and Leonard was given another chance. But disgrace made him miserable, and twice more he went AWOL.

He faced the Psychiatric Board three times, each appearance resulting in more drastic punishment. One incident from those hearings tells a great deal. He was trying to be so honest with the board that one member accused him of making fun. At last one doctor asked an oddly penetrating question.

"Pollari, what would you do if I handed you a pint of whiskey right now?"

The answer was simple, revealing, and pitiful.

"Sir, I'd drink half of it - and save the other half for tomorrow morning."

It was the truth, in spite of unbearable shame and a desperate desire to please his commanding officer.

In 1945 Leonard Pollari found himself a civilian, holding one of those ambiguous "blue" discharges. Back in Wisconsin he drank away the days from one unemployment check to the next.

His gift for trouble stayed with him, and within two years the game warden wanted him for shooting deer out of season. This called for a move, so Leonard ran out for Chicago.

The lights of the Skid Row honkytonks were Leonard's Christmas tree in 1947. There on the street he teamed up with another boy as lost and lonely and self-hating as himself. His buddy's name was George Gedney. Together they bummed in and out of the saloons, looking for fun they never found and feeling mutually sorry for themselves.

George had been on the street longer and was first to strike rock-bottom. He began talking gloomily of suicide. But Leonard was still looking for something unknown and unattainable, a glorious adventure that never happened.

That was a cold winter. At the end of weeks of drinking, Leonard's shaky nerves and weakened body needed warmth and shelter. The door of the Pacific Garden Mission was open, so he stumbled in.

During that night's meeting, two speakers penetrated Pollari's awareness, and both for the same reason. "They smiled so good."

One was a Jew with a glowing face who spoke joyously about JESUS CHRIST. The other was a sailor. He talked the same way and with the same smile.

The sailor found Leonard some food and got him a free bed in the servicemen's dormitory at the Mission. Sleeping there in an army bunk, Pollari felt almost the same sense of "belonging" he'd known in the old Medical Corps squadroom.

When his sailor friend moved on, Leonard went back to the street. He was afraid someone might "tackle him about religion."

He got a job, built up a nest egg, and then hit the bottle again harder than ever.

In March of 1948, sick and aching, half blind from a blood-clot on an optic nerve, he shuffled into a Harrison Street beanery to spend his last quarter on food. He was eating carefully, hoping the food would stay down, when someone slid onto the next stool and called him by name.

It was his old drinking buddy, George Gedney. Even with a bad eye, Leonard could see that George was changed. The man who had so recently talked of suicide was decently dressed. Most

amazing, he was smiling. Gloomy George Gedney actually looked happy!

Leonard stared.

"What happened to you, George?"

"What do you mean?" George was grinning. "You look good. You smile so good."

That made George Gedney laugh aloud. "You mean, I really look different?" Leonard nodded his admiration.

"And I've only been a Christian three weeks. Lenny, this is part of the plan, running into you like this!"

"What plan?" Leonard was lost.

"GOD's plan, of course. Let's go back to PG together.

You've got to have this thing, too, old buddy. You look like you really need it!"

"PG? What's that?"

"Pacific Garden Mission. Wait'll we get there and"

"I've been there," Leonard broke in. "Hey, you mean you've got religion?"

George laughed again.

"I've got better than that, Leonard. I've got JESUS CHRIST . . . or maybe it's the other way around. Remember how I used to talk about dying? Well, I'm really livin' now, Len. And so is JESUS CHRIST."

Leonard let George lead him around the corner and down the street to the Pacific Garden Mission. Sick and confused, he knew one thing for certain. Gloomy, miserable George Gedney was a changed man, and Leonard wanted desperately to be changed, too.

He let George take him to the Mission prayer room where they knelt together; and so far as Leonard saw in the light he had, he accepted CHRIST.

Leonard Pollari stayed at the Mission for a month, building up his weakened body. When he left to live and work outside, he was a man physically, but still an infant spiritually. Away from Christian fellowship he let his attention wander from CHRIST to self; and he slipped, badly.

He went back to the Mission for help, knowing Who offered strength and healing and forgiveness. This time he stayed a year.

When at last he went out on his own, he again found it hard to keep from stumbling. But now there was a tremendous difference. Tempting as they were, the attractions of the world left him

ashamed and unhappy. He had seen the meaning of the Cross, and it left no room for self-pity. He slipped and fell and got up again repeatedly over a two-year period before he finally saw the face of his enemy - and recognized self.

Pride in pocket, he took his problem to Harry Saulnier, superintendent of the Pacific Garden Mission. Leonard stated it with the same honesty he had once brought to the Army Psychiatric Board.

"Why can't I live in the world and not drink? Why do I fail?"

And Harry Saulnier, who sees more alcoholics in a week than most people do in a lifetime, offered a gentle suggestion.

"Maybe you've been interested only in what CHRIST can do for Leonard Pollari. You see, Leonard, that's reason enough for a man to turn to Him in the beginning. But it's not good enough to grow on. A baby loves its mother because she means comfort and protection. But as the years go by, the growing child loves his mother for herself alone. When he's grown up, he wants to serve instead of to be served. Maybe it's you instead of CHRIST in the center of the picture. Maybe you need to study GOD's Word instead of yourself. If you want to try it, Leonard, we need you here . . ."

"You need me?" Leonard glowed.

"We do. Stay on here and help us. You'll have time to think and study things out."

Leonard took that offer, and began to make an interesting discovery. He puts it this way.

"Mr. Saulnier was right. I'd been studying me instead of GOD's Word. I thought I surrendered to CHRIST, but all I really gave him was my drinking problem. I tried to give Him the bottle and hold onto my right to myself. Now I've turned over me, and CHRIST can have the center of my life. He doesn't need to drink - so neither do I."

Now Leonard Pollari speaks confidently for CHRIST and the Pacific Garden Mission throughout the Middle West. He testifies and his victorious life shows that he will never thirst again because there is, " . . . **in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.**"

~ end of chapter 1 ~

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